

# WILDLIFE CORRIDOR CONSERVATION AUTHORITY

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Ms. Ester Valadez, Chair  
Los Angeles County  
Regional Planning Commission  
320 West Temple Street  
Los Angeles, California 90012

## Additional Comments on Draft Environmental Impact Report Rowland Heights - Tentative Tract 49411

Dear Ms. Valadez:

The Wildlife Corridor Conservation Authority (WCCA) offers the following additional comments on the Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR) for the above-referenced project that proposes 55 single family homes and grading on approximately 45 acres (plus several acres of brush clearance) of a 170-acre site located on the north-facing slope of the western Puente Hills. We ask that you fully consider our comments in our January 13, 1999 and October 26, 2001 letters (see Enclosures), in addition to the following comments which were adopted at our January 16, 2002 Governing Board meeting.

The County's staff report for the October 31, 2001 Regional Planning Commission Public Hearing recommends denial of the project for three reasons: (1) the project has been previously dedicated as open space in support of the 265 single-family homes entitled by Tract 34146; (2) the project is inconsistent with the objectives and policies of the Rowland Heights Community Plan; and (3) the project is not compatible with the biotic resources and watercourses present on the site. We understand that consideration of this project was continued to the January 23, 2002 Planning Commission hearing and that additional information may be provided by the applicant regarding these issues. We request that all of our letters be included in the packets that are distributed to the Planning Commission at their next meeting.

### Proposed Development in Area Conditioned to Be Maintained as Open Space

With respect to item (1) of the County's staff report, we understand there is some controversy regarding whether or not the subject 170 acres was previously conditioned to be maintained as open space. We believe it would be unconscionable to approve a development in open space set

aside for another project. The County's staff report points out that the subject 170-acre project was identified in several of the County's conditions of approval to be maintained as open space for Tentative Tract 34146. According to the County planner, the homes on Tentative Tract 34146 have already been built. Per the staff report, the developer assured the County that it would be permanently maintained. Also, no further subdivision of the property is permitted. It must be legally clarified if the construction restriction on the 170 acres was a temporary prohibition prior to moving forward with processing the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) document. If the applicant provides additional information as to why the subject 170-acre site is not in fact restricted from development permanently, this information must be clearly presented to the public.

### **Biological Resources**

With respect to item (3) of the County's staff report, our previous letters identify the ecological significance of the subject 170-acre site. The subject project site is within an area proposed by the County's consultants to be included in a Significant Ecological Area. Significant oak and walnut woodlands exist on the project site and the proposed loss of 288 oaks (including five heritage oaks) and 17-27 walnuts represents a project incompatible with the resource. (We derive these numbers from the DEIR and from conversations with the developer's consultants. Within the DEIR [p. 1-7, 6-42], the number of oaks and walnuts that would be impacted is inconsistent. The CEQA document must accurately portray impacts to these and other sensitive biological resources. The DEIR also does not identify the number of heritage oaks to be impacted in the section describing impacts to oak and walnut woodlands.) Although restoration potentially could offset some impacts to these woodlands, the proposed project would result in a significant, unavoidable loss of oaks and walnuts and should be avoided.

In particular, oaks are slow-growing and a significant amount of time would pass before the restored sites would either resemble, or serve the same functions and values as, the impacted site. In addition, there is always the possibility of restoration failure. Often monitoring is required a set period of time (e.g., 3 or 5 years), and after that there may not be assurances that the plantings will be sustained. California walnut woodlands are considered highly threatened by the California Department of Fish and Game and are sensitive and declining within the Puente-Chino Hills. The ratio of two oaks to be planted for every oak to be impacted is too low. A ratio of 5:1 is more appropriate. We disagree with the statement that the loss of approximately 17-27 walnut trees would not result in a cumulative impact to biological resources. (The DEIR is incorrect in the statement that there is a Firestone Scout Reservation reserve for walnut woodlands. There is no evidence that this is a protected reserve.) We also recommend that restoration for loss of woodlands be conducted prior to project impacts.

Furthermore, the appropriateness of the proposed restoration cannot be assessed without a review of the acceptability of sites proposed for this planting in the proposed 138-acre open space. According to the DEIR (p. 6-44), the plantings would occur in "the 138.5-acre open space area currently without trees but in areas otherwise suitable to sustain oak and walnut stands." Justification must be provided for the proposed restoration sites. For example, has there been an analysis of historic photos to see in the past where oaks and walnuts have grown? These historic photos should show the land prior to the initiation of grazing.

If appropriate areas cannot be found onsite based on an analysis of aerial photos, offsite mitigation areas within the Puente-Chino Hills that have historically been shown to support these types of woodlands, and which are as close as possible to the subject site, should be considered. This mitigation can consist of acquisition and/or restoration. Any mitigation area on or offsite must be permanently protected (see our October 26, 2001 letter).

As referenced in the December 1, 1999 biological report in Appendix D, implementation of oak/walnut restoration should not occur in areas of coastal sage scrub, a sensitive plant community. We are also concerned with mitigation proposed in annual grasslands with respect to the cumulative loss of habitat for sensitive species such as raptors. What mitigation is proposed for this loss?

As we state in our previous letter, the proposed project is also not compatible with the watercourses, in that it would result in impacts to over a mile in length of four streams (see Figure 6.4-2 of the DEIR). What, if any, mitigation is proposed to offset the loss of the functions and values of these streams?

The DEIR does not provide a reasonable explanation for the basis of the comment that "project site...does not function as a significant corridor for wildlife" (p. 6-35). In addition, the DEIR is deficient in that it does not include a discussion of the importance of the Puente-Chino Hills, for regional wildlife movement and as core habitat. The DEIR must analyze the minimal critical reserve size of the western Puente Hills relative to maintaining the viability of this corridor to prevent local extinctions of wildlife species. In particular, the area between Harbor Boulevard and the 57 Freeway is a choke-point for wildlife movement. Projects within this area could significantly impact wildlife movement. Impacts of this project on regional needs for wildlife must be identified and analyzed in the EIR and significant impacts must be avoided.

Woodlands, coastal sage scrub, and annual grassland (which may be used for raptor foraging) exist on the adjacent open space (approximately 11.75 acres) north of the subject 170-acre site. The development, under the currently proposed configuration, would isolate the resources on this adjacent open space, and would also isolate important habitat

resources remaining on the 170-acre site (e.g., in the northern portion). Cumulatively, these impacts could be significant.

The increase in domestic pets and the possible effects to adjacent wildlife are noted in the DEIR (p. 6-38). This discussion must be expanded to include the full range of indirect effects that are expected to result from this project, including increased lighting. Clearly worded mitigation measures must be included in the DEIR to reduce the potential of adverse impacts from domestic pets, lighting, and other indirect effects. We concur with Mitigation Measure B-5.b. (DEIR, p. 6-44), but recommend that the underlined text be added: all native landscaping within the common areas of the project development shall be revegetated using only native and drought-tolerant species that are native to the local foothills. We also recommend that all plantings on the exposed slopes, landscaped areas, and for the oak/walnut restoration be from locally collected sources.

According to the DEIR (p. 6-43), relocation of animals from areas to be impacted is not an acceptable solution, because of the potential for increase competition and disease. It is not clear what is to be done with animals collected in the project area (e.g., the sensitive San Diego horned lizard [*Phrynosoma coronatum blainvillei*]).

As we point out in our two previous letters, these significant impacts to biological resources that would result from this project must also be considered in light of cumulative impacts from other projects (e.g., proposed AERA project).

### **Compatibility with Rowland Heights Community Plan**

With respect to item (2) of the County's staff report, in our previous letters, we provided an analysis of why the project is inconsistent with the Rowland Heights Community Plan. Any change in this plan must be fully justified; the current DEIR does not provide this. Specifically, according to the plan, the areas designated as "Open Space" are intended to remain undeveloped for the life of the plan. According to the County's staff report "amendment of the open space category would be contrary to the Rowland Heights Plan objective of preserving a regionally significant open space corridor and the resources within it."

### **Impacts on Recreation**

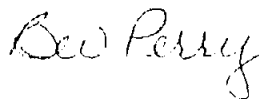
The EIR does not provide an analysis of the impacts of the proposed project on recreation. Would the equestrian facility continue to exist in the open space? Also, the DEIR should clarify the current use of trails in this area whether there would be visual impacts to trails. We recommend that impacts to trails be avoided.

## Conclusions

WCCA concurs with the County staff recommendations. It appears the project may be proposed in an area already dedicated open space for another development. The project would result in numerous significant ecological and other environmental impacts. All signs point to the obvious conclusion that the County should deny the project and make a concerted effort to direct the subject 170 acres to a public agency with a conservation easement granted to the County.

However, if the County decides to proceed with processing of the proposed project, a revised DEIR that addresses these issues raised in our two previous letters and this letter, must be prepared and circulated to the public for review and comment. The current DEIR is deficient in numerous areas. We reiterate from our two previous letters that there must be a thorough analysis of alternatives to maximize avoidance of significant ecological and other environmental impacts, and we suggest specific alternatives. Any revised CEQA document for this project must also include: an accurate assessment of biological resources and anticipated impacts, including wildlife movement; the rationale for a project that is inconsistent with the Rowland Heights Community Plan; the rationale for the incompatibility of the site with existing landforms; a justification for a development in an area already set aside as open space; and assurances that any proposed open space would be dedicated to a public agency. Please contact Judi Tamasi of our staff at (310) 589-3230 ext. 121 if you have any questions.

Sincerely,



Bev Perry  
Chair

Enc. (2)

cc: California Department of Parks and Recreation (Enrique Arroyo)  
California Department of Fish and Game (Jeff Drongesen)  
United States Fish and Wildlife Service (Jonathan Snyder)  
State Clearinghouse (Scott Morgan)